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Of Mermaids, Metal, And Maine: An Illustrated Memoir

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Abstract

This creative literary thesis consists of the first chapters of a memoir, offering readers a glimpse of my childhood world and self in rural Maine. The memoir's overarching theme is the interplay between person and place. The work also explores the ability of memory and imagination to shape perception. Included are several of my own drawings to help illuminate my imaginative and lived experiences, evoking the odd but artful whimsy of childhood. While still rooted firmly in memoir, the project draws from fantasy, magical realism, and graphica, reflecting modern literature's inclination to transcend traditional boundaries of genre and style.

Of Mermaids, Metal, and Maine:
An Illustrated Memoir

Dedications

To my parents, my earliest and most influential patrons.

To Dr. Beverly Matiko, an understanding mentor.

To Chris, a constant companion and editor.

To my writing group, here's to stories in the making.

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Introduction

I had no time for memoirs when I was growing up. All nonfiction seemed lifeless when compared to the science fiction sagas and fantasy novels I devoured. Nothing of real life could compete with the thrill of the *Animorphs* series, Tamora Pierce's enchanted Tortall books, or even *Nancy Drew*. However, in recent years I've learned to find enchantment outside of fiction, and my appreciation for the genre of personal narrative writing turned into a desire to create my own. My friends, having been regaled with odd or amusing stories from my childhood, egged me on, expecting something as light-hearted and eccentric as my spoken renditions. What I actually ended up writing is a bit more serious and reflective, though equally odd. The stories that I had told in bits a pieces began to form a cohesive narrative that I could see myself in.

In *Dakota: A Spiritual Autobiography*, Kathleen Norris explains why she felt drawn to write about Dakota and her experiences there, saying,

> ...this is my spiritual geography, the place where I've wrestled my story out of the circumstances of landscape and inheritance. The word 'geography' derives from the Greek words for earth and writing, and writing about Dakota has been my means of understanding that inheritance and reclaiming what is holy in it. (2)

This explanation resonated with me as I thought of Maine, where I feel that I wrestled my own story. Instead of spiritual implications my memories are tinged with the mystic imaginings of my childhood, and my memoir reflects how my experience was saturated with fantasy.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines memoir as "Records of events or history written from the personal knowledge or experience of the writer… autobiographical observations; reminiscences." Acclaimed memoir writer bell hooks makes an important distinction between autobiography and memoir. Speaking of her own memoirs, she says, "I gather together the dreams, fantasies, experiences that preoccupied me as a girl, that stay with me and appear and reappear in different shapes and forms in all my work. Without telling everything that happened, they document all that remains most vivid." The distinction she makes between memoir and autobiography is that while autobiography is expected to tell the broad, chronological, event-based story of a person, memoirs typically meaningfully meander and elaborate. Memoirists repeatedly grant themselves permission to take a moment of life and play with it and ponder it. While autobiography is concerned with documenting, memoir is free to acknowledge that memory has shaped the events as much as the original experience, consciously incorporating the perspective of the writer in the modern day. This understanding of the word "memoir" is the one I have adopted for examining memoirs from both the inside, through writing, and the outside, through research. Informed by considerable reading of other memoirs, as well as critical material about the specific genre and the broader designation of literary nonfiction, I have written four chapters of my own memoir that gives a glimpse of my childhood world and self as I explored rural Maine.

My creative nonfiction writing is influenced and formed by my passion for fantasy, both as a literary genre and lived experience. As bell hooks reminds us, children continually exist in a world of fantasy where everything is larger than life. In my own writing I try to show the otherworldly and imaginative aspects of childhood that often

feel akin to magical realism, the literary blending of fantasy and reality in which the magic inherent in the universe plays a part in day-to-day affairs. I have included several of my own illustrations alongside the written portion of my project to help the reader draw closer to my imaginative and lived experiences. I am indebted to the illustration styles of poet Stevie Smith (1902-1971), who often included small illustrations (sometimes called doodles) with her poems. Overall, my writing and illustration have been influenced by my reading of graphic memoirs (particularly Ramsey Beyer's *Little Fish* and Hope Larson's *Salamander Dream*), comics, and graphic novels, especially "indie comics," which are known for their odd and diverse art styles. In my illustrations I try to blend childish and adult perspectives, allowing readers to see aspects of my young life not only in their mind's eye but also rendered on the page. The illustration style is simple and natural, as I try to illuminate the odd but artful whimsy of childhood.

In "Conversation and the Language of Autobiography" from *Studies in Autobiography*, Geoffrey Galt Harpham notes,

> One of the late Paul de Man's most ingeniously counterintuitive suggestions was that autobiography produces life rather than the other way around; or, in his words, 'whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium' (p.920). We might translate and normalize de Man's paradox by saying that lives that at some point issue in autobiography are typically lives lived in anticipation of that fact, lived in consciousness of their own narratability… a mode of being that has as

> its primary orientation its own eventual conversion into narrative, its own eventual reading by others. (42)

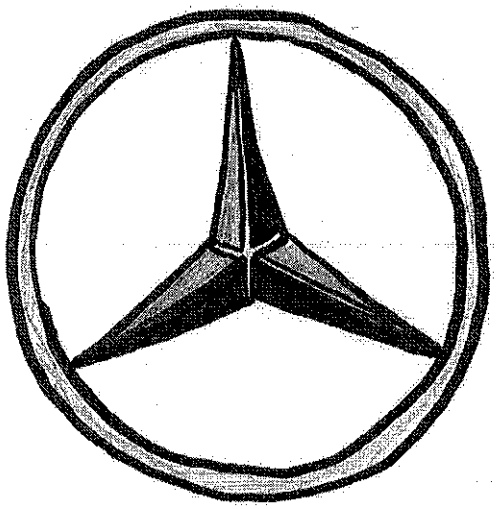
While the author is discussing autobiography, the same idea holds true for memoir writing. In the past few years I have observed this drive to build narrative resonance into reality within my own life and the lives of my friends. While it sometimes brings a certain satisfaction, it also taints experiences with preemptive nostalgia. In *On Writing*, Stephen King's memoir and writing guide, he comments on the same trend, saying, "Put your desk in the corner, and every time you sit down there to write, remind yourself why it isn't in the middle of the room. Life isn't a support-system for art. It's the other way around" (101). The beauty I found in writing about my childhood is that while I had been obsessed with playing pretend and mixing reality with fantasy worlds, I was unconcerned with narrative resonance. It was unselfconscious play, which has made writing about it so much fun.

My first major collegiate assignment was to write a personal narrative. When I was done with it I reviewed it and realized that it was the best writing I had ever done. Later classes and assignments cemented my interest in personal narrative writing and over the semesters I built a small collection of essays I was proud of, eventually culminating in my desire to bring everything together in a larger work. Somewhat ironically, the first essay I wrote in college became the backbone of my senior Honors thesis. I wonder what this project would have looked like had I not left Maine to go to college in Michigan. The undercurrent of my writing centers around how the place I grew up shaped me, and I am unsure if I would have been able to see the influence my home had on me if I still lived there. The overarching theme of my memoir is the interplay

between person and place, specifically how memory and imagination shape the perception of place, and how place shapes memory and imagination. My project blends genres and, while still being firmly rooted in the memoir, pulls from fantasy, magical realism, graphic novels, and graphic memoirs, reflecting the inclination of modern literature to transcend traditional boundaries regarding genre and style.

Finding Tire Tracks

I grew up among the skeletons of cars. Twenty-two vehicles in various states of disrepair and decay were scattered about my yard, a memorial to an age of sturdier automotive design. Most were gnarled gargoyles, keeping watch, a constant sentry duty that they would never leave, but a few did start up when they were in the right mood.

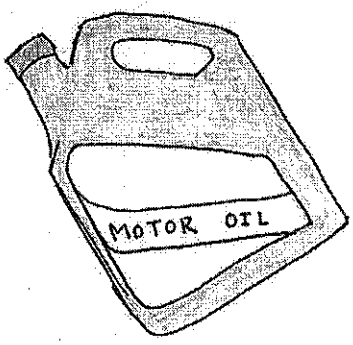


My dad was a mechanic, specializing in old Mercedes-Benz cars; he could coax even the most stubborn old automobile to start up when he turned his attention on it. My name is Mercedes, and while *technically* pronounced differently, in practicality I share a moniker with the cars. I was the only Mercedes in the lot that wasn't an antique. Inevitable questions arise, such as "Are you named after the cars?" While I'm sure that the connection was not accidental, my parents had a good excuse in that it was also my paternal grandmother's middle name, one that had been passed down a long line of women in my family.

Like any good Mercedes, my house is a garage, complete with a smattering of car parts and manuals. Home is a full service four-bay with one bay converted into what could be loosely called an apartment. Although the other Mercedes were not allowed in the apartment section, I was never far from the smells of automotive fluids and the discontented rumble of elderly engines.

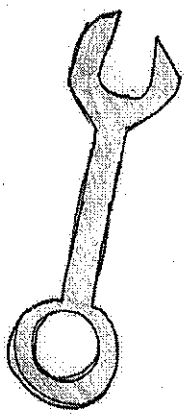
Each of the cars was an individual, complete with personality and story. They

were my siblings, imaginary friends, and hiding spots. Queenie was a two door with back windows that didn't work anymore. Like a stubborn teenager her doors always slammed and she was in constant need of discipline and repair. Pearl was a motherly, cream-colored station wagon with holes in the bottom through which you could watch the ground rushing by below. There was Pepper, with fuzzy seat covers like an overgrown tickly beard and a radio that played only country stations; he was the grandfather of the bunch. Blue Winkle was the odd one out, a bright blue Dodge van that had a temper and a bad habit of catching on fire at inconvenient places. Best yet there was Goldie, the lovely golden coup. Goldie was the only one to live inside the garage, the last bay reserved for her alone, though she didn't run. She was the movie star, a tarp covering her smooth golden curves better than any form fitting dress.



My parents had the habit of naming them. After a new car arrived my parents would sit in it for a while and decide on the name.

"She's definitely a girl. Too pretty and petite to be a boy." The Mercedes were usually girls because their make is more graceful. We also had quite a few Volvos, which were sometimes boys because of their boxier design.



"Red. We could call her Ruby."

"What about Sheila?"

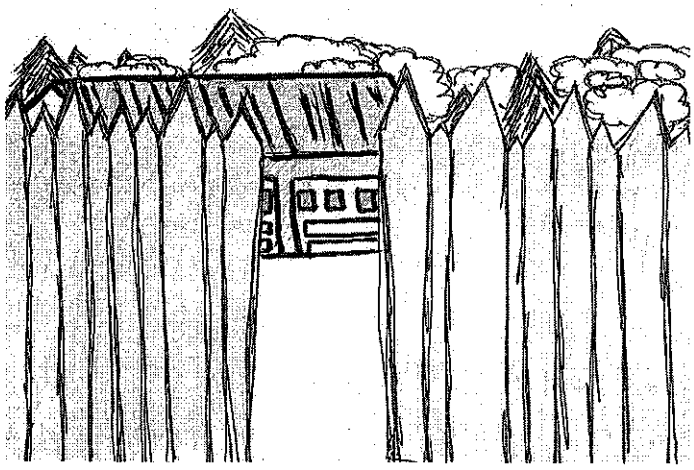
"Yeah. Sheila." And so a car is named.

Old cars have a special "old car smell," nothing at

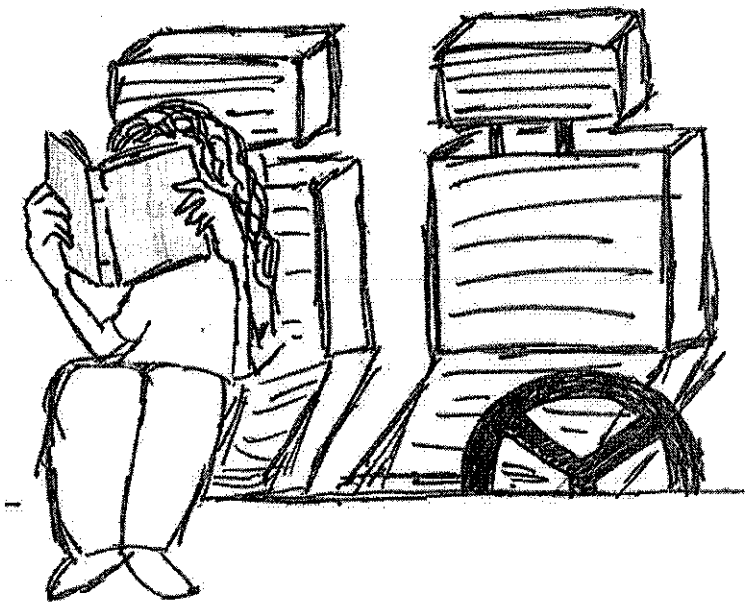
all like the coveted "new car smell." Each one smells like dust, sun, a little cigarette smoke, as well as the unique scents of the car. You could try to cover up the smell, but it never quite goes away. It's soaked into the seats, carpets, and upholstery so thoroughly that trying to get them to smell of anything else is futile. Slowly the smell sinks into people as well and that it's always at the back of their nose like a song stuck in the head or a word on the tip of the tongue. I think that's the way it was with my dad anyway, that he had the old car smell stuck at the back of his nose.

Some were parts cars, valued only for their organ donation options for cars more salvageable, but most were permanent patients. Many mechanics are like doctors, assessing the problems and fixing them promptly so the car can return happily to its former life. My dad ran more of a nursing home for cars. The idea of fixing them was there, but few would ever again leave the yard on their own four wheels.

The cars, once so modern and useful, were now slowly being joined back to nature. Jewel-colored insects and bugs made their homes in nooks and crannies. Squirrels and mice nested with bits of fluff from the seats. Spiders made walls of webs, and our raspberry bushes overgrew and began reaching their thorny fingers inside opened windows or missing doors. Slowly the relics were being reallocated to fit nature's needs, becoming ancient ruins, no longer part of the fast-paced twentieth century.



When I was around six, the town declared our yard an "eyesore" and made us put up fences, and then more fences. The yard became a maze, a tangle of cars and fences and tall grass. When I was very little I was afraid of going past the first few cars. The yard to me looked simultaneously wild and desolate, with cars looking out from broken headlights, potential monsters lurking in every backseat and behind trees and overgrown plants. As I got older, I became braver and more interested in hiding places. The cars were perfect retreats. A childhood's supply of forts and secret palaces were at my disposal. I would take whatever book I was reading, leave the garage, and sit in one of the cars for hours. Anyone looking for me, trying to bring me back to reality, would have to hunt though a few cars first. "Mercedes!" my mom would shout, and I just sank lower in my seat. How was I to know which one she was calling?



The cars were mysterious in so many ways, not only as decaying monuments to the past, but simply as cars. To a child, cars are a gateway to unimaginable freedom. Sitting in the driver's seat of crippled

automobiles allowed a glimpse of what it meant to be in control of my own life, to be able to decide my own place in the world in a very literal way, but only a small glimpse as I was still unable to see very much over the dash.

Each vehicle hid artifacts – beads rolling around on the floor, old papers and notices, giving hints about my parents' life before me, or even just pennies made special by their seclusion from the rest of the living, money-spending world. Once, I found a boxed set of *The Lord of the Rings* in one of the backseats. They were long forgotten and slightly water damaged, but they received an honorable place on my shelves. Perhaps they were in the car simply because no one had ever removed them after the vehicle was retired, but I like to think that my father also liked to sit in the cars and read occasionally.

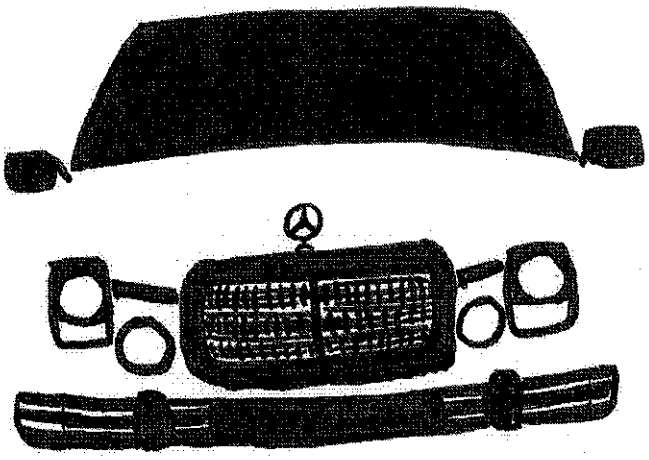
While I remember him vividly, shoulder-length hair tied back with a colorful bandana and a long scraggly beard, my memories are mostly of watching him rather than spending time with him. I watched him tinker with cars, spied as he did welding work before shooing me away so the bright hot metallic flashes wouldn't harm my vision. Perhaps most importantly, I watched him read. He would lay in bed and reread a novel or flip through pulp sci-fi magazines. He would lie back and work through Asimov, Heinlein, and other science fiction giants. And I would find a spot of my own and go through dozens of chapter books. My mom would yell up the stairs, "Are you two still just reading?" Our bodies were still but our minds were fighting wars and colonizing planets. I wondered if, sometimes, when he was working in the garage, he pretended that he was fixing a space ship, a Mercedes-Benz rocket, a vision of the future instead of a relic of the past.

When I was a child my dad worked out of state as a machinist for most the week,

so for long stretches at a time I would see him only on weekends. Shortly before I started high school he passed away quite suddenly. At his funeral they played the song "Mercedes Benz":

> Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?
>
> My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends.
>
> Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends,
>
> So Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?

It rang out, filling the church with Janis Joplin's signature voice, along with the muttering of some church-goers who were more accustomed to hearing hymns at funerals. They never knew my father, or they would have known that for my dad that song was a hymn.



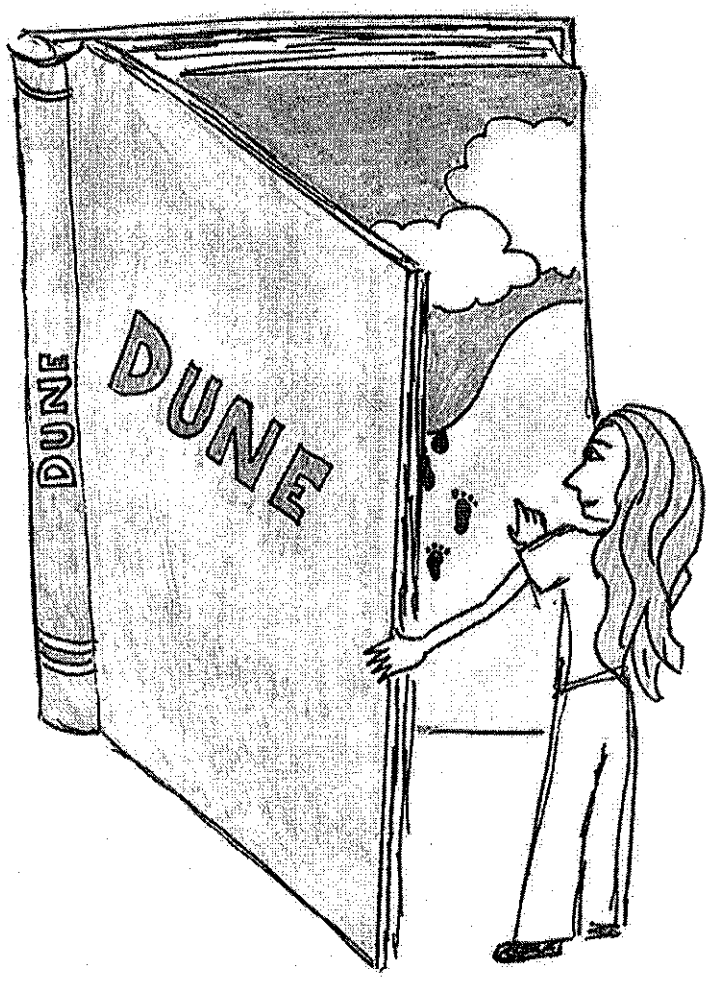
As was the next song: the theme from *Star Wars*.

While he was alive I don't think we ever read a book in common. He never made recommendations to me, and all of his books were intimidatingly large and complex. We rarely talked about books together; in fact the only time I can remember discussing any with him was when he was in the hospital, on his death bed, and the only thing I could think to tell him about was what I was reading.

After he passed away, I suddenly became interested in his book collection, gathering it all together and shelving it with my books. My inheritance was stacks of

science fiction paperbacks and some trunks full of magazines. I found his favorite copy of *Dune*, a stately red hardback among common softcovers. On the inside of the front cover he recorded every time he reread it, the same initials followed by different dates going back to his teenage years. I read it and when I was done I added another date to the list beside a new set of initials. Starting with *Dune* I tried to establish my place in his literary lineage.

The books stayed, but the cars went. The twenty-two cars started dwindling. One by one they left – all hope for their recovery had disappeared. Some were sold for scrap metal or parts cars, others to be fixed or act as someone else's lawn ornaments. It was fine with me. The cars deserved to move on.

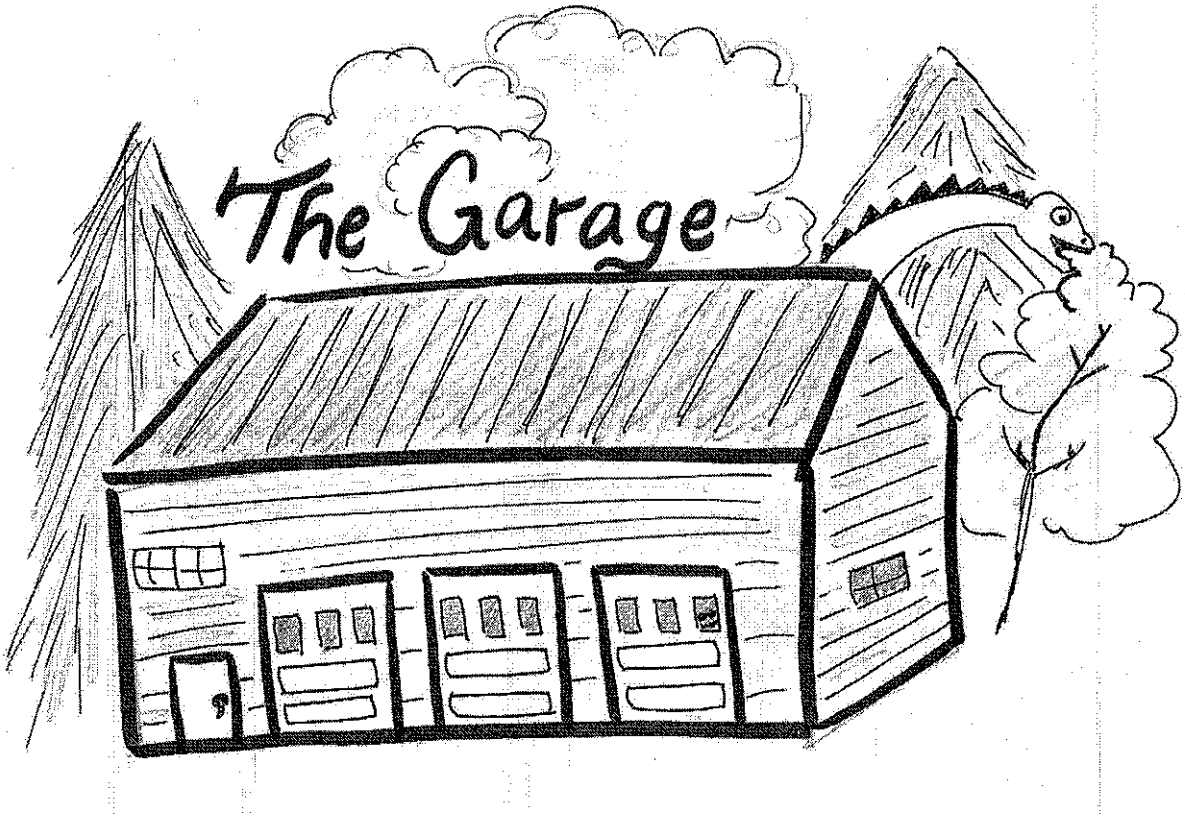


It has taken me time to really start understanding how my dad's presence and occasional wisdom helped shape me. Much of it feels so organically me that I didn't realize many of my traits were originally his. Whether by nature or nurture he planted the seeds of an analytical mind, a bitter temper, and literary tendencies to compliment the

inherited library. When I go back to Maine to visit my mom, she will always pick out something about me and shake her head, saying, "You truly are your father's child. What a McLean." I try to dissect myself and see what pieces came from him, but it's mostly guesses and suppositions. Visiting home, I find myself looking through old notepads and paper scraps (my mom never throws anything out) hoping that he wrote something enlightening somewhere, but I only find mechanic records of gas mileage, notes about transmission fluid, and garage grime finger prints. I try to put myself in his shoes, but he usually went barefoot, both literally and figuratively, so I have to settle with walking in his footsteps instead. I crack open another tome of Asimov and see if I can find his trail.

Geography of a Home

My home has no doors. There's the front door, to keep the creatures and the snow out, and there are the garage doors, to let the machines and the cars in, but there are no doors on the inside. No bedroom doors, no bathroom doors, no closet doors. It's a place without seams, one complete tangle of furniture, artifacts of life, and oddities.



We don't call it a house because it was never intended to be one. My home was originally a garage. The sort of garage where cars go to get fixed, not the sort that is attached to houses. It started life as three bays and a small office until my parents began shifting things around. A series of pictures and childhood memories vouch for the slow progression from full garage to its current partially transformed state. The first bay is now an apartment, and the cement floors are covered with layers of carpet remnants. The garage's high ceilings gave way for a second floor to be inserted. Insulation was added,

uncovered fiberglass fluff covering the ceiling with sunrise pink clouds. We finally got running water around the time I was eight, an event my mother celebrated by allowing me to have my best friend from school over to my house for the first time.

The first thing to greet visitors – brave souls – is a large slab of metal, painted green. It serves as a door to the inside of the garage portion of The Garage. A rope protrudes from a hole in the metal where a doorknob should be. Time spent pulling, yanking, tugging, and muttering incantations will usually open the door eventually. The handle for the other side is a goldish-colored, dolphin shaped door knocker that my dad took a fancy to.

"Why is the knocker on the inside of the door? People can't use it to knock," I noted.

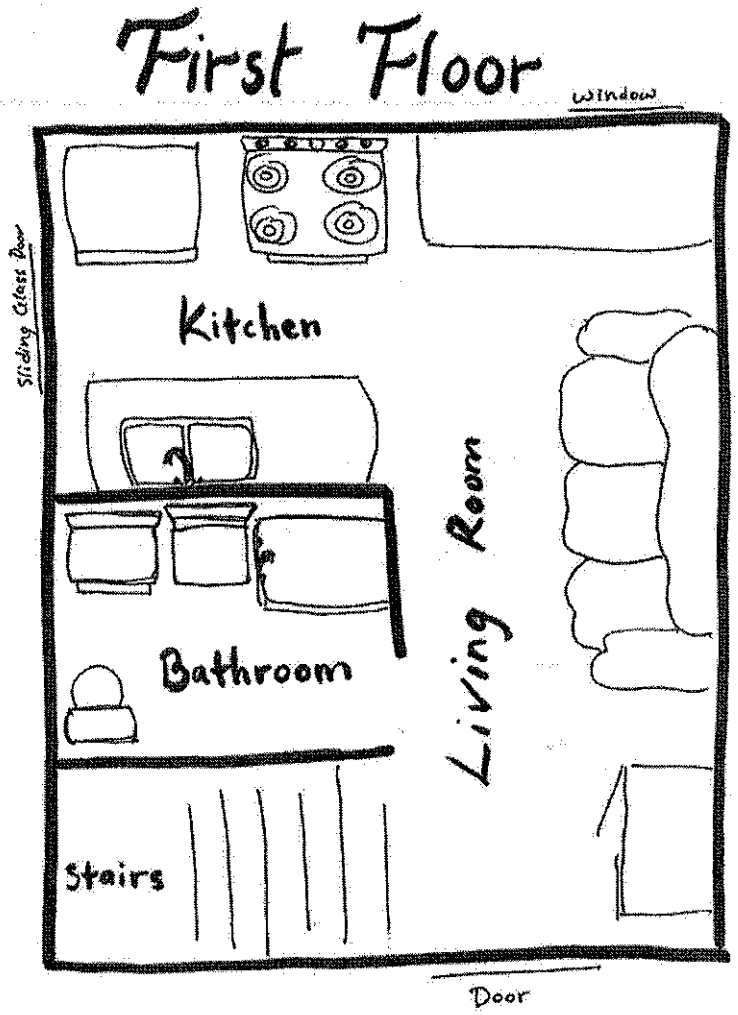
"We can use it to knock before we go outside," was the only answer I ever received. I suspect that the real reason was that my dad figured someone else would take a fancy to the goldish, dolphin-shaped door knocker if it were the handle for the outside, and they would take it, and we would never get into our home again.

The green slab of metal opens onto a narrow alley between towering shelves which house dishes, puzzles, musty looking books, an odd assortment of clothes and material, and a variety of other debris that washed up on the shore of our home. At the far end of the alley there is the red door.

This door, the front door, is relatively normal. It is probably the last normal thing. Opening it reveals a kaleidoscope of images, all the times my mother rearranged the furniture, shifting the whole world around. The living room section is a swirl of couches and beds, extra layers of clashing carpets and rugs, a variety of small television sets, and

a large mirror mounted on the wall to reflect all the objects and movements in their cycles. Unfinished walls are covered in collages of pictures and childhood artifacts.

The inside of my house is as wild as the outside, the sort of place where you could never find what you were looking for, but something interesting would turn up instead. My living room was the shore of the world, and while the tides took many things away (library books, sweaters, wallets, papers), they deposited even more (old volumes of poetry, a variety of rocks both plain and ornate, a wallet made out of a taxidermied toad, odd political posters).



When I was young my father purchased a dignified leather living room set, something he found on clearance at one of those stores that takes the stuff that bigger stores are trying to get rid of. The leather was somewhere between cream-color and grey, cool to the touch and easy to clean. It looked strangely out of place in our den of eccentricity. When my parents had more people around than the couch could seat, out would come the small plastic toddler chairs for overflow seating. Over the years the couches gained deep wrinkles, and when I squinted I imagined a great, grey wrinkled elephant -- the elephant in the room, and I was

the only one who saw it. My mom rearranged the remaining furniture nearly biweekly, which became a running joke among my friends, who began visiting frequently. The loveseat remained and was paired with bunk beds. I have no idea where the bunk beds came from, as an only child a bunk bed would have been unnecessary, but they stayed in our living room for years, and were often used by my friends when they decided to stay over. My home became a popular hangout spot, as my mom would happily provide food, kept odd hours, was never bothered by loud noises, and didn't care who came and went.

My friends treated my home like an odd museum, carefully examining my mom's crystals, her recent sewing projects, mechanical bits that drifted in from the garage, and everything else. A crowd favorite was a sign my dad found at a thrift store of a flow chart of diagrams concerning how to resuscitate a lizard – including mouth-to-mouth. Friends thought of my home as a place of adventure and freedom, while I saw it as a restrictive embarrassment when compared with their relatively neat and orderly houses. My five closest friends and I moved as a pack, roving from one house to another, staying a night or two before moving on.

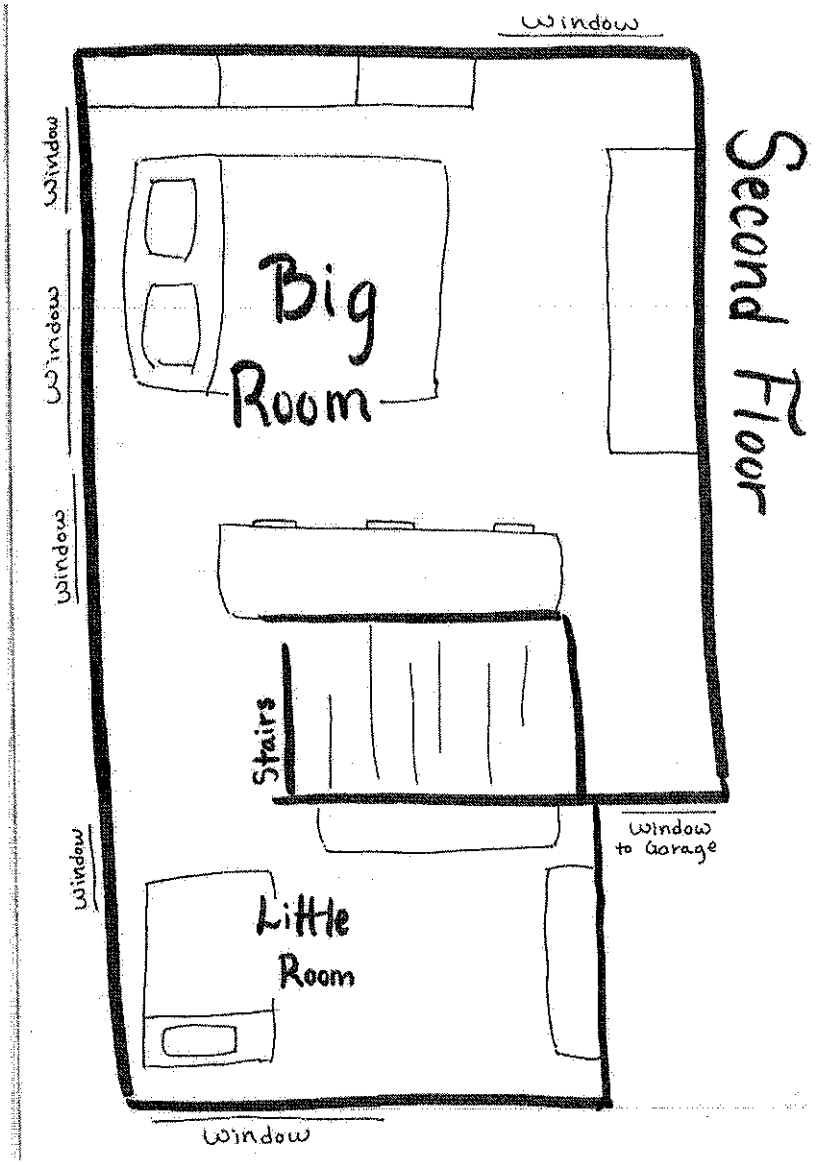
While the "bedrooms" were upstairs, my mother always worried during the winter that they were too cold as we tried to conserve propane and heat only the downstairs, blocking the upstairs off with a curtain of heavy blankets. One especially frigid winter when I was eleven or so, despite my protests, I was moved downstairs to sleep in the kitchen, next to the sliding glass door that was blocked up with snow. I objected to this setup because my dad stuck out the cold upstairs, despite my mother's numerous complaints and habit of going to bed in full winter regalia of lined jeans, fuzzy sweatpants, snow pants, a large sweatshirt, a down jacket, a neck warmer, mittens, and an

expansive hat. She would peer out angrily from under her down comforter and mutter curses at the cold and at my dad. I wanted to tough it out like my dad, but was forced to bend to my mother's wishes. A lumpy cot and two sets of curtains were set up, one to cover the clear face of the sliding glass door and protect me from the cold that tried to pour through and another to sequester my bed off from the rest of the kitchen.

This was the most private area I had ever called my own, a whole floor away from my parents. I kept a cheap little battery-operated black radio beside my bed, hidden up against the sliding glass door in the protective tangle of curtains and blankets. If I listened to the radio quietly I could play music late into the night with my parents none the wiser.

It was a winter dominated by Fall Out Boy and Gorillaz songs, and in review this season had a lasting effect on my musical tastes. Listening to the pop station made me feel connected to other people even though I was so far away from anyone else. It made me feel normal despite sleeping in the kitchen of a largely unheated garage masquerading as a house.

When it wasn't serving as a stand-in bedroom, the kitchen sometimes felt almost normal. An old refrigerator, a gas range, a sink, some counters and cabinets. But there was still plenty of oddness. The floor was covered in carpets, remnants piled upon remnants, stained with kitchen-related wear-and-tear. My parents had allowed me to write on the refrigerator with permanent marker, so it was covered in the scrawl of a younger me. The four-burner stove eventually became a three-burner stove as one burner refused to work, then a two-burner stove as the pilot light went out on one side. The counter-tops were covered in stuff, everything from canned goods to clothing and knick-knacks. The bread-box was filled with important documents and money stashes. At one point my mom became insistent that we get a dishwasher. After a few years we finally got one, an outdated clearance item in a huge box, and put it in its little space under the kitchen counter. It still sits there, never actually installed, used for storage. At one point our home had a dramatic squirrel, chipmunk, and mouse infestation. They were everywhere, eating our food, burrowing in our clothes, rustling in the walls, and crawling through the insulation in the ceiling. My mom eventually solved the problem by storing all of the food in either the refrigerator or the dishwasher, leaving bare cupboards and effectively starving them out.

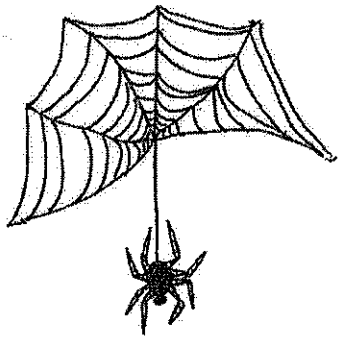


The upstairs may be even odder than the downstairs. Going up a rickety staircase, pushing past the blankets and sheets of plastic that my mom uses to separate them and avoiding the piles of books left on the stairs, leads to one large room to the right and a small room to the left. The ceiling is so low that a man of average height will feel his hair brush against it, which is made even more awkward by my mother's habit of stapling memorabilia to the ceiling. Drawings from childhood, poems, posters, kites, and bits of old Halloween costumes transform the ceiling of the larger room into an extended scrapbook. The large room was my parents' bedroom, my bedroom, a play room, and storage. Piles of stuff and shelves that line the walls take up most of the space. Adding my parent's queen-sized bed and my own smaller bed left not much room for navigating.

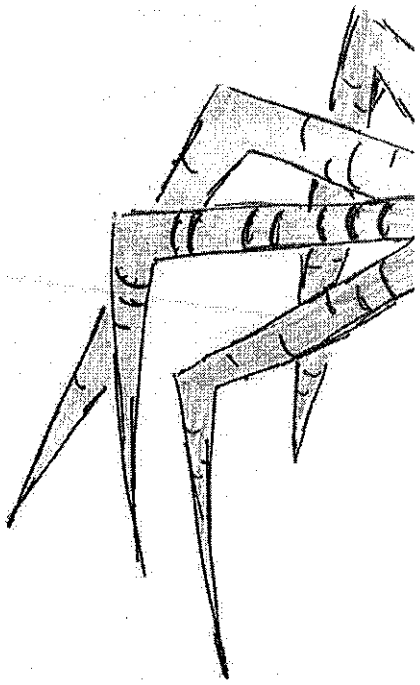
The Big Bed is the first actual bed that I remember. It's the queen-sized bed that I

shared with my parents until I was around eight years old. My father slept on the right, my mother in the middle, and I on the left edge. Until I was older I didn't know that this arrangement was unconventional.

Of this bed, I mostly remember sneaking away. Slinking downstairs in the middle of the night was the highlight of my evening. I would slither out of bed, as silent as a five-year-old can be. I would try to tip toe by my parents' heads. Usually one would sleepily mumble, "Where are you going?" The truth was that I was going downstairs to watch the strange TV programs that only showed at 3 in the morning, infomercials or enticing programs about cab drivers, or that I was going to open all the cupboards and take all the bottles and boxes out and mix things around. Probably both. "To the bathroom," I lied assertively and unconvincingly. Down the stairs I went. Bed was uninteresting and unenticing when compared with the wonders of my home left unsupervised.



Around the time I was eight I demanded my own room, a difficult proposition since my house isn't separated into many rooms. The whole upstairs is one large room and a small room sticking out the other side, which was generally considered a large closet. My demands were met as I was put in the smaller of the two rooms, leaving the larger room to my parents. My dad couldn't even stand up straight in my room. He had to tilt his head to one side a bit. The closet-sized space suited me. Prior to my arrival the room had held all manner of odds and ends and much of the contents remained, but I had my own bed under my own light that would be ideal for a reading station. While I considered them "my own bed" and "my own light," another member of the household also considered these things its own. Almost as soon as I moved in I noticed an expansive spider-web covering the ceiling light. On that web there was often a spider. It was huge, with finger-sized legs, stretched out as it relaxed in its bed (something I was unable to do as it hung over me). The legs were striped and its body was delicate. My parents identified it as a barn spider. "Harmless," my dad proclaimed. I stayed up late at night thinking about its longs legs reaching out to me. Imagining its long legs stroking my hair. Imagining its long legs touching my face. "Please get it down," I begged. My parents refused out of sheer cruelty, coupled with the knowledge that it's very likely that if they got rid of this spider another would take its place in a day or two. "It gets rid of mosquitoes for you," they said. Eventually I



was moved out of this room as winter encroached and the small room was uninsulated. It was back to the big room for me, but I still had my own bed. Doubtless the spider moved out as well, finding a warmer place in the house.

I roosted other places in the garage, then other places in Maine, and now the Midwest, but I carried the soul of the Garage with me to every place I have lived since I moved out. While it's a little more organized and a lot cleaner than the Garage, my current house has a similar essence of eccentricity and eclecticism. Each surface has a few rocks, a little figurine, some books, a handful of papers, or a smattering of other arcane ingredients that magically transform a collection of rooms into a home. Friends have remarked, "Your house is like a museum, but always changing. And weird." It is this oddness, a buildup of memories and a collection of things for the future, which gives a person, place, or thing "soul," making it more than a collection of its parts. I see myself this way as well, composed of bits of childhood climbing trees, pieces of my parents, a smattering of car parts, and pages of every book I've read, memories and investments.

The Greenwood Forest Witch

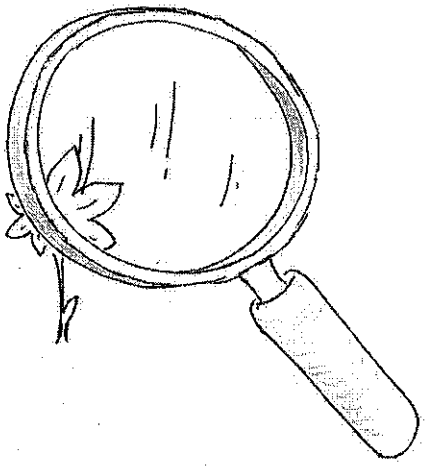
In warm months I often escaped the hot, muggy outside air by reading in the cave-like garage. One day during the high heat of summer I saw movement in the yard from the side window of the garage, a dim and spiderwebbed pane that had customarily been covered. It was unusual to see anything moving out there, as it was fenced in and populated by old cars, so I went over to see if someone was home early or if a large

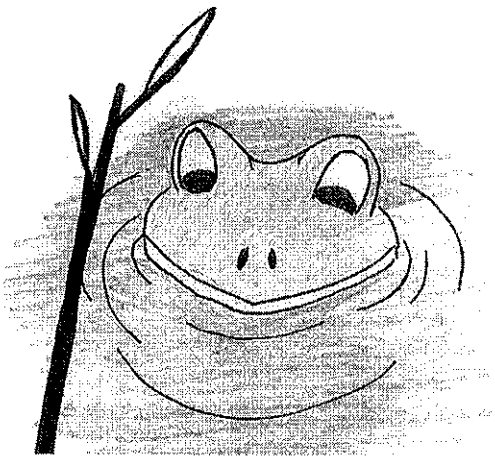
animal had bounded in. Two children, both around ten years old, were looking around like frightened deer. For the first time I realized what an odd, haunted place my home must look like from the outsider's perspective. Blocked in by fences and surrounded by forest, it must have been an enormous temptation for curious children to explore the unkempt building and junk-scattered yard overrun with sunflowers and tall grass. What a pity I had grown up too close to be awed by it, as these two clearly were. One saw me looking through the window and they both ran, perhaps from fear of being caught, but more likely from fear of what was surely a ghostly visage staring at them through the gloomy garage window.

I never told my parents about the incident. They would have been furious at the intrusion, and while I certainly didn't know which of the summer neighbors the children belonged to, I wouldn't have put it past my mother to find out. My mom is a modern-day sister to the evil, enchanted-forest dwelling witches of fairy tale and fable. This image is

heightened by her long, wild, dark hair, her sharp features, petite frame, and tendency to bundle up in a variety of strange clothes, blankets, and pieces of fabric. She is intimidatingly loud and refuses to bow to polite social conventions, leaving frustrated and cowed people in her wake. As with traditional story witches she often seems more like a force of nature than a person, an embodiment of the volatility of the natural world.

During the summer my mom gardened and cut paths into the woods. She would take gardening shears and hack away at the undergrowth, crisscrossing the woods with narrow trails. Like my mom, the woods near my house have an unkempt look. The trees are old and tall, but not so much so that they prevent sunlight from reaching the forest floor, so the ground is covered in brush. The native trees are a tumultuous mix of coniferous and deciduous, all grown in close together with lopsided branches and tripping roots. Many of the middle-sized trees are bent from a terrible ice storm that coated everything in diamond hard ice for days, breaking branches and making trees bow low. Leaves from previous autumns litter the ground, hiding deep puddles. The land is peppered with large rocks, some the perfect size to be a seat, others big enough to be castles.





We lived in the perfect location for a witch. A primordial

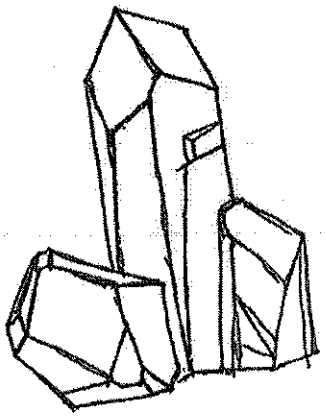
forest that taught me to look for the things just beyond sight, to let stories build up on me and superimpose images that would leave me chasing pirates and dragons. These woods provided ideal soil for imagination. Before setting out I prepared adventuring kits, a key part of any successful adventure, containing magnifying glasses, notepads, and pens. Putting special rocks in my pockets made them into talismans and artifacts. I would head into the woods, collecting bountiful spell ingredients by picking up leaves, feathers, flowers, moss, and mushrooms, and mix the components together in my cauldron, a deep water-filled dent in-between rocks, stirring with a great big stick, which was also my wizard's staff and hero's sword. Most spells were completed by slowly adding pine pitch, leaving dark iridescent rainbows on the water.

Winter nights led me to climb on my favorite rock to howl at the sky, natural luminaries unclouded by human lights, and spring was a time of monitoring the gelatinous growth of frog eggs, and tadpoles, and frogs, and

their endless chatter. Whenever an unusual silver puddle caught my eye, I would stare at the sky and at my reflection and know, barely holding on to the shadow of my doubt, that one step through the mirrored surface would transport me to a world that conformed more to my imaginative desires and expectations. Autumn was digging through lost foliage, hoping to find treasures instead of disturbed insects. My childhood was spent hunting for delicate fairies and behemoth dinosaurs hidden among shrubs and ferns and swimming with mermaids in the ponds near my home. My mother did everything she

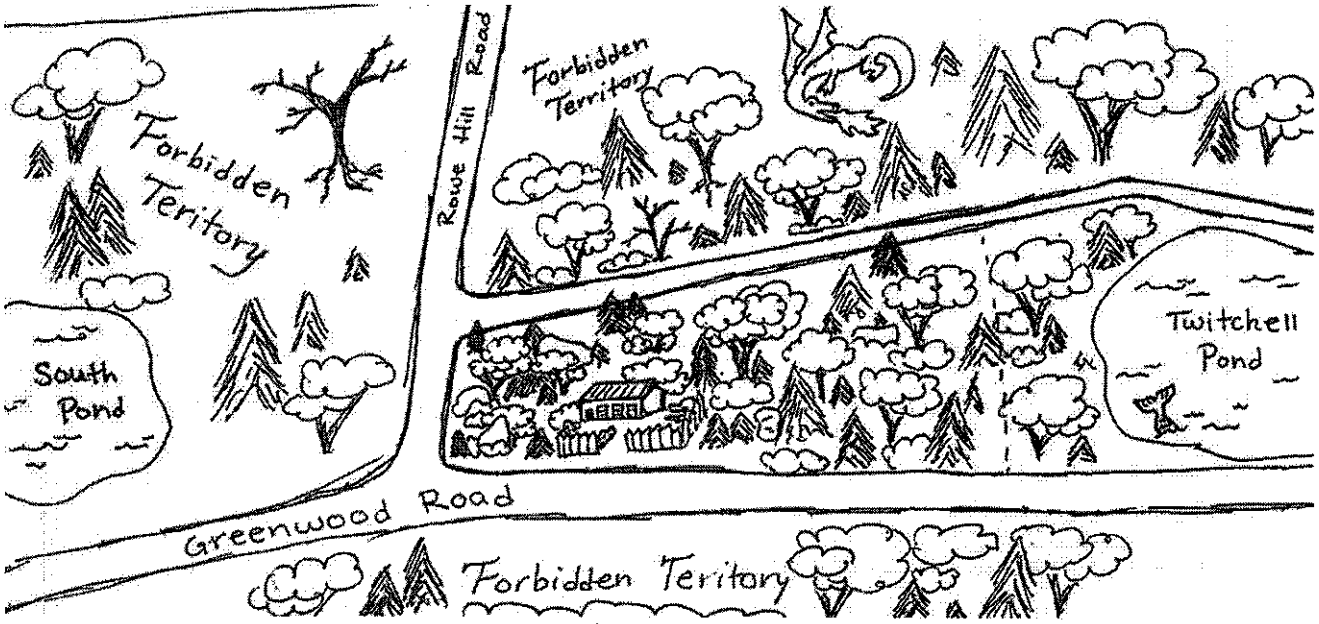
could to encourage my wildness.

Even growing up with her as a constant presence, she remains mysterious beyond common place familiarity. I know that she grew up in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, about an hour from our home in Maine, but she shared few details of her personal life before me. In college my friends began sharing stories about how their parents met and things their parents had done in younger years, leading me to realize that I had very little to share. My odd stories and anecdotes were unable to convey my mother's ferocity or her strange, profound connection to the land of northern New England.



My mother is part of the landscape, all weathered crags and vines of hair. A land not too far removed from the enchanted forests of fantasy novels. She is an enthusiastic, though unconventional, gardener and an avid rock-hound, decorating our home like a magpie's nest, filled with shining chunks of smoky quartz, amethyst, mica, tourmaline, and other stones that she found on local excursions. She is reluctant to drink water from anywhere but the town spring, and is known for filling empty jugs there and lugging them around with her. Like a woodsy sorceress she is reclusive and finds no need to travel more than an hour or two from home. While she has traveled some, even spending a few years in Florida, she resists venturing outside rural northern New England, and is unlikely to wander to more populated places. My mom is more deeply connected to the land than anyone I know. The land in our part of Maine is ragged – deep ponds and lakes rub shoulders with rocky

hills and mountains with pockets full of semi-precious gems. While I've never seen her do traditional yard work, as our yard was neither mowed nor raked, she often spent time trimming bushes and young trees, creating paths in the woods and removing dead brush to burn later. Instead of the pastoral relationship that most people have with their land, viewing it as something to be cared for, tended, and ultimately restrained, my mother and



our yard seemed to be on friendlier terms.

During one of my few visits home during my college years, my mom and I were driving down a familiar road, one that we typically used at least a few times a week, when she suddenly pointed up at a nearby mountain, saying, "That's where I lived when I was your age." I was taken aback, both because I hadn't known she had moved away from her home town in New Hampshire that young, and because she had never pointed out this landmark before.

"I didn't think there was anything up there," I said, keeping my other thoughts to myself.

"There isn't. Just some dirt trails and a few summer cabins. No electricity or

running water. I lived up there a few years."

"Did you live up there during the winter?"

"Yeah, I just bundled up and kept the wood stove going."

And she hasn't mentioned it since. It might explain why she thought our rickety garage was a suitable home, and perhaps it also explains the depth of her connection with the woods.

My maternal grandmother has always been incredulous at my mother's life choices. There has been a lot of tight-lipped silence, quiet exclamations of "Oh, Louise..." and small shows of support by buying my mom new mud boots or a functional, yet fashionable hat.

Looking at my grandmother makes my mother's oddness stand out even more. While my mother is all unbrushed hair and eccentricity, my grandmother is prim and composed. A former Macy's beauty counter employee, she has carefully styled light brown hair, neatly applied makeup, and season appropriate lipstick shades. My mom's nails have a thick layer of dirt from gardening and my grandmother's are manicured in pink, nude, brown, or red.

Underneath all these differences, which, while superficial, indicate vastly different ideas about propriety and success, they share a love for the land. They both love hiking and the White Mountains of New Hampshire, where my grandmother has always lived and where my mother grew up before moving an hour east to Maine.

My mom has had many jobs over the years, including waitressing for a variety of different local pubs and restaurants, house cleaning, teaching driver's education, and selling sunglasses, but if you asked her what she did for a living she would consistently

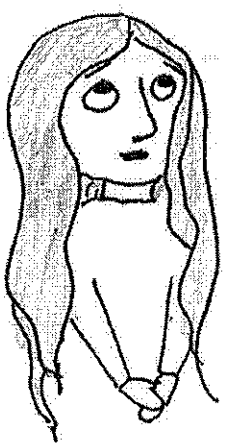
say that she is a jewelry designer. While she has never made much money doing it, she constantly worked with semi-precious stones to make jewelry, selling them to one of the most well-known local jewelers, who would put her offerings in his shop. I was perpetually enchanted with my mom's beads. White, rippled pearls, pink rose quartz, green and fuchsia tourmaline, purple amethyst. She has fine, expensive silk thread in a hundred different colors, and special beads shaped like cats, wolves, hearts, and dinosaurs. She would carefully piece together necklaces, holding up each stone to the light to check for color and clarity, putting the best beads in the center of the necklace and slightly less perfect ones near the clasp. After laying them out she would thread a thin needle, a tiny wire really, and slide it through each bead before tying a knot to separate the stones, ensuring that they wouldn't clack against the others. If the string should happen to break, only one stone would be lost. She often encouraged me to make necklaces with her beads, but she never liked any of the designs I laid out, changing them beyond recognition.

When I was around eight years old I decided to run away from home, but I read enough to know that usually children who ran away from home came right back, leading me to stage a fake an escape instead. I crept behind the fence that separated the driveway from the car-strewn yard and set up a spot for myself where I would be hidden but able to hear my parents if they talked about me. I brought food and books. I waited. My parents had all the doors open, garage doors and all, and I could hear everything they said. They talked about lunch, work, and hobbies. They mostly didn't talk at all. Eventually they talked about dinner. At long last my name was mentioned.

"Have you seen Sadie around?"

"No. She must be out somewhere. I guess we'll see her when she's hungry."

I waited for more. They fell back into comfortable silence. I decided to wait them out, really make them worry. I read more. I ran out of snacks. I kept waiting. I could hear my dad's tools clinking as he worked on something. I played pretend, and had long imaginary conversations, many of them revolving around how sad and regretful my parents would be if I actually did run away. I waited for them to call for me to come home, but the call never came. I was hungrier than I was patient and I looped around the yard and went in the house from the side door.



"You've been out awhile. There's dinner left on the stove for you."

When I was in middle school, my mom began taking long walks on the dirt road that ran behind our house and around the lake we lived next to. Winter or summer she would trudge out at least once a day. Often she insisted that I accompany her, mostly in an effort to get me outside and active as I became more bookish and sedentary. I inevitably fussed and dragged my feet, but once she decided that I was coming with her, there was no getting out of it. I protested by either walking far ahead to rush the task, or far behind to worry or hinder her, but she just kept her steady pace. Eventually I got an audio book and learned to walk contentedly.

After my father died I had no idea what to expect from my mother. She didn't cry, so I didn't either. When my Aunt Jennifer, my mother's best friend and biggest support, was murdered only days after my dad's death, my mom cried for almost an hour, then composed herself and moved forward. I had no way to tell if she was digesting this pain and loss internally or bottling it up, becoming a bomb that would devastate my life even more than the recent tragedies. While we talked constantly, often about important topics, my mother put almost no significance in emotion or feeling, and it was an unbroachable subject to ask how she was handling the sudden

changes.

One evening shortly after these losses, she went on her normal walk. It was just the time of year when the lake was thawing. It was still frozen in spots, dotted with patches of open water. I was reading when I realized that she had been gone longer than usual. I began to panic, terrified that the cornerstone of my life, the only stone left standing, would be lost as well. I was scared that she had lost her footing and hurt herself, or fallen in the water, or that somehow this person I lived with was a complete stranger to me whose grief I had ignored and with no outlet had decided to kill herself by jumping in the water. I reminded myself that each of those scenarios was extremely unlikely. I tried to concentrate on a book but found myself reading the same sentences over and over. I told myself wryly that it would be the height of absurdity if my mother, the woman who bundled in layers and layers of coats and blankets, decided to kill herself with cold. But the past week had put the universe in an absurd and bitterly ironic light. When she had been gone double her normal time, I called my aunt and grandmother, telling them that I was just lonely. Eventually, I mentioned that mom had been out a long time, which didn't seem to worry them much. When she had been gone for over three hours I considered, briefly, calling the police, but I knew that if my fears were not true, and I was nearly certain they were not, my mom would never, never forgive me for calling the police, whom she has overwhelming animosity towards. And if my fears were true, and I was nearly certain they were not, it was too late anyway. I considered walking out and trying to find her, but decided against it. I sat on the couch and cried the way I hadn't cried for my dad, or aunt, or anyone else. When I heard the loud, metal outside door to the garage budge open, I dried my face in an effort to hide the fact that I had been crying. My mom

came inside and started peeling off a layer of outer clothing.

"Is everything all right?" she asked when she saw me.

"Yeah, I was just worried. You were out for a long time."

"Oh, I went around the lake both ways. And then when I was almost home I met the neighbor, and she wanted to go for a walk, so I did it all again. It's still pretty cold out there, but it warms up once you get going. You should have come out with me."

"Maybe next time."

Growing up, I was inundated by remarks about how much I resemble my mother. At the time I didn't see it. Now, I look in the mirror and I see her legacy: long, wild hair, mine a shade lighter; a shared petite frame, witchy nose, green eyes. Beyond outward appearance I share a tempered version of her assertiveness, her volume decreased by a few decibels, and a slightly thawed portion of her cold, unsentimental practicality. In the same way that I didn't see our physical resemblance before, I thought that I hadn't inherited her love for the land. I thought that I wouldn't care where I settled down, but having been gone for years I find that I still have Maine at my roots. And I wish I had the gumption to carry around jugs of our local spring water too, because she's right, it's just better than any other water.

A few times my mom took me to the top of a nearby hill after it rained to mine for tiny scepters of quartz and tourmaline, popping them in her mouth to clean them and keep them safe. Copying her, I tasted the residual soil and felt the crystal clink against my teeth.

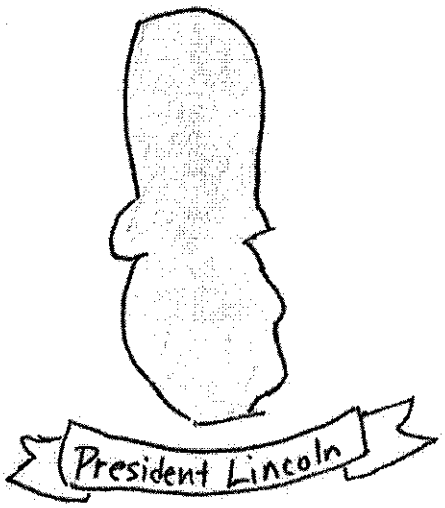
My mother loves stones of all kinds and she sometimes pulls over to the side of a back road to haul large rocks into the trunk of the car if she likes their shapes. The times I

remember her being happiest with me were when I had gathered large bags of rocks for her. When we went to the beach she would sit on the shore and collect stones, bringing full paper bags to the garage and pouring them in the yard. Sometimes we would sit on the beach and find shapes in the stones.

"This one's a polar bear. See, that's the nose."

"Oh, and this is the eye."

"This looks like President Lincoln. Here's the hat."



The Soul of Things

The cars we drove were the sort that threatened to break down a few times a year. Sometimes a few times a week. Only my dad's consistent, if jerry-rigged, fixes kept them on the road. While our cars came cheap, only the free labor made them affordable, and when my dad died my mom quickly concluded that we needed a more reliable vehicle.

I was away at boarding school when my mom went to a car dealership in Vermont, coming home with a petite silver Suzuki hatchback. It was shiny and clean, no dents or rusty spots hastily covered with almost-the-right-color spray paint. I hated it immediately. The engine had no purr, the ride was too smooth, and all of the windows worked properly. It had no personality. It was like the corpse of a car. A zombie, running perfectly fine, but with no soul. It didn't help that it was a standard transmission, a stick shift, which didn't bode well for my ability to drive it any time soon.

I considered myself fortunate that I didn't have to see the new car very often. School was a few hours away and my friends from home visited me more often than my mother. When I became driving age, fifteen and a half in Maine, my mom started pestering me to try and learn to drive the nameless Suzuki. I sat in the drive-way, stalling over and over, considering any movement at all a great success. As a whole, this method was an unequivocal failure.

I had always assumed that I would learn to drive from my father. He was the one who drove everywhere when my family was traveling together, the one who had me sit between his legs to steer I was little, the more level-headed one. I had also assumed that I would learn to drive in a Mercedes with familiar rumbles and grumbles welcoming me to the adult world.

In the end my mother taught me in her work car, an out-of-fashion but not old Toyota, complete with Drivers Education sign on top as a warning to other drivers. My mom became a driver's education teacher a year or two before I could legally drive, and while I begged to be allowed to take the course with someone else, my pleas fell on deaf ears and I found myself in a summer session at the local public school. The classroom experience was one of mild annoyance as I read a large volume of Russian fairytales instead of the driver's manual (which I was already familiar with). In contrast, the driving portion was filled with shrieks, curses, slamming, and the sorts of disagreements all too common between mothers and daughters.

"You need to *slow down*," she yelled with unnecessary volume.

"I'm going four over. Calm down," I huffed as I took the familiar curves on the winding road back to the garage.

"You are going too fast!"

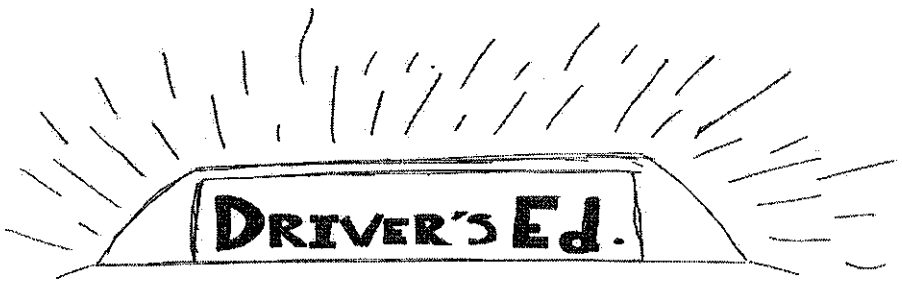
"I ride with you every day on this road and you never go less than ten over."

"But I'm not in Driver's Ed."

"But you are the driver's education teacher! How would that look if you got caught speeding?"

"There's no one out here! No cops come on this road."

"Then it's fine for me to go four over!"



Years after taking Driver's Education my mom drove to my boarding school in the truck that she was giving me. It was new to us, but old in general, giving off an air of sturdiness. There was no love at first sight between my first vehicle and me. The first mark against it was that it was a truck, possessing only two seats. This, I knew, would "cramp my style" and wreck all my visions of being able to impress a variety of friends with my driving prowess. The old Chevy was faded red with a belt of black around its middle in an ironic attempt to look sporty, an unconvincing illusion on the impressive hunk of metal. It was harder and sharper than the newer cars that shared its parking lot. It seemed to look at the other cars with disdain, weighing their plastic forms hungrily.

"Why can't I see what gear I'm in?" I asked my mother.

"Oh, that's broken. You'll just have to remember. Don't worry, it'll become habit pretty quick," she assured me. I reluctantly pulled out of the parking lot.

"How am I supposed to see how fast I'm going? Where's the speedometer?"

"There isn't a gauge, it just shows you the number in the middle there."

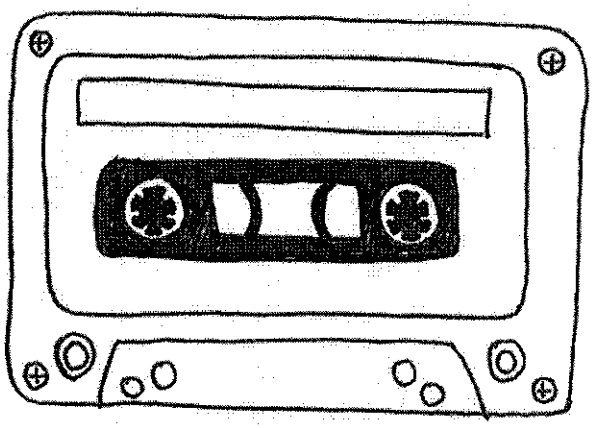
"Then why isn't it showing anything?"

"Hmm…" My mother thought a moment before sharply slapping the dash. The light reluctantly flickered on, letting me know that I was going 12 miles an hour. I sighed and reached out to turn the radio on.

"Oh, the radio doesn't work. The antenna is broken." I mentally slammed on the brakes, my mind filled with radio static. No radio? What is the point of a car without a radio?

I had expected the truck to lack a CD player, but lacking a radio was too much. *Well, I suppose it's fine that there are only two seats since no one will ever agree to ride in a car with no radio,* I thought. I was ready to consign the truck to the scrap heap.

"The tape player works though," my mom said cheerfully, ignoring my dejection. She opened the middle compartment and pulled out a variety of cassette tapes, remnants of my dad's small collection and a few that my mom had picked up at thrift shops, all stuff that played on the oldies station. I rustled through the pile, pulling out vaguely familiar artists and band names. Journey, Stevie Nicks, and Simon and Garfunkel ended up on the top of the pile and I gloomily popped one in the player.



My mom left and snow came. For the first time I drove unfamiliar places by myself. The small tourist town surrounding my boarding school, which had managed to remain mysterious to me for the past four years, divulged its secrets. Tentative trips to the grocery store turned into extended wanders. While I initially insisted on disliking the music from the cassettes on principle, the songs grew on me. The union of an old but new-to-me truck, my old but new-to-me town, and the old but new-to-me music made everything interesting and worthy of examination. Not until I had the truck to myself did I finally learn the art of driving, the feel of a vehicle under my control, the finesse of guiding tires to dance between potholes. During this period I felt solitude for the first time. I was continually joined by the Simon and Garfunkel cassette that I had initially rejected. Their folksy tunes led me through the snow and ice, keeping me

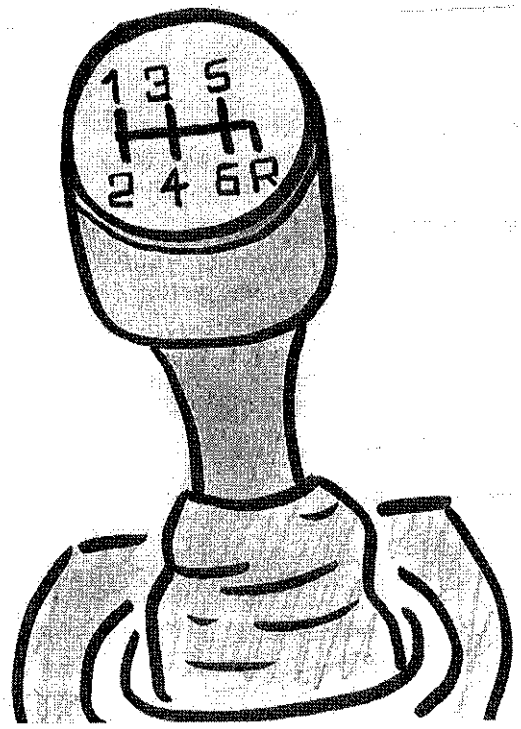
company as I continually got lost on familiar roads. I no longer needed someone to take me places, and for the first time I could explore on my own. In the truck I was by myself in a way that I never had been before. Unreachable. Just me, Paul Simon, and Art Garfunkel. They sang about "A Hazy Shade of Winter" while I drove on slushy Maine roads. The outside world was cold and bleak, but my internal season was all rambling growth and unhindered exploration.

Look around
The grass is high
The fields are ripe
It's the springtime of my life
Seasons change with the scenery
Weaving time in a tapestry
Won't you stop and remember me
At any convenient time?
Funny how my memory skips
Looking over manuscripts

When I got my first car, I inherited the earth. The world was mine in a way that it never was before. I was suddenly interested in every side street that I had overlooked. This was autonomy. This was free will. The last year of my high school career is overshadowed by being able to decide my own place in the world. If I wanted to go out for ice cream at 10:00 in the evening on a Tuesday, I could do that. I found out what people and things mattered to me now that I could actually visit them. The museums and shops I had

always thought I would visit if I had a chance stayed unvisited but I learned the personality of every beach in the area.

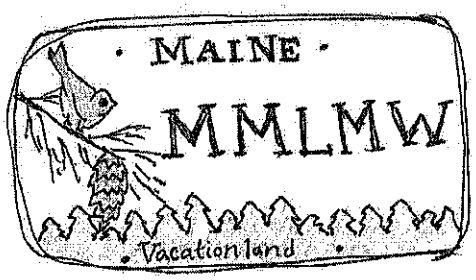
College was in many ways a complete reversal. Living in a disappointingly small college town with no car meant relearning how to strategize trips and made every venture off campus an escapade. The summer before my sophomore year of college I began negotiations to take a car back to Michigan with me. We had plenty of cars around, though only the Suzuki was in good condition. I said that I would be more than happy with the truck I drove in high school or the little Tracker I drove the summer after I graduated. My mother (wisely) declared that neither of these were actually likely to survive the trip out to Michigan. She decided that I could take the Suzuki. I was dejected. The truck and the Tracker were familiar, homely, full of idiosyncrasies that tied them to me. The Suzuki was not only a stranger but also an embarrassing challenge. No matter how well it ran, I wouldn't be able to get it to Michigan if I couldn't shudder my way out of the driveway. Driving stick continued to elude me, despite constant lessons. Eventually my mother gave up and told me to just try driving it around, which resulted in a few high-stress stop-sign incidents that left people behind me honking.



Setting out with a car full of dorm-room supplies, a handful of new CDs, and blind confidence, I began the 20-hour solo drive to Michigan. Once I was on the highway it was smooth sailing, throw it in sixth gear and straight on till morning. Toll booths became my arch-enemies, I would glide in, hand over my money, and promptly stall. And then stall again. I would putter away, hoping that the toll-booth worker didn't think I was too much of a road hazard. Eight states and at least a dozen toll booths later I arrived at college.

My friends accustomed themselves to the quaking of my car until one day we all realized that it had been weeks since I had stalled. I learned to drive in Chicago, feeling strangely omniscient as I balanced obeying traffic signals, shifting gears, and avoiding pedestrians. Soon my car was littered with books, costumes, and artifacts from school, Renaissance Faires, movie premieres, and comic conventions. The ceiling gained boot-print stains from a friend who curled up in the back seat and cried over heartbreak. The underside of the fender was torn up by a Canadian curb as we parked illegally to peer at Niagara Falls on one of many road trips. The backseat will never be entirely free from the sand of countless beach trips. Beholding my car now, I see soul in every dent and stain. Where I once saw a zombie I now see a reminder of accumulated experience, songs soaked up from the radio and countless important conversations that my vehicle has been witness to. These things have built up on it, layer upon layer, to bestow soul. Looking back, even over a relatively scant amount of years, I can say the same of myself. The place I grew up and the people I revolved around left residue all over me, and while each layer is too thin to see on its own, it builds up. The patterns of this residue, the memories

and experiences, form a person, dust mote by dust mote, invisible until I took a moment to look down and recognize the imprints all over me.



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